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A Crooked River : Rustlers, Rangers, and Regulars on the p̃y Lower Rio Grande , 1861 1877

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A Crooked River: Rustlers, Rangers, and Regulars on the Lower Rio Grande, 1861-1877. By Michael L. Collins. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. xiv, 345 pp. Cloth \$29.95, ISBN: 978-0-8061-6008-5.)

In recent years there has been a definite surge of revisionist histories of borderlands violence. Juliana Barr, Ned Blackhawk, Lance Blyth, Brian DeLay, Andrew Graybill, Pekka Hämäläinen, and Natale Zappia, among others, have discussed different shapes and different temporal and geographical spaces of violence, covering ground from intimate threads involving families and communities to indigenous empires and transnational raiders, while also transcending the early West with the settler colonial period. Now Michael Collins, a professor emeritus at Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas, has set his sights on the violent landscape of mid-nineteenth century South Texas. There numerous rival groups, including independent Indians, Confederates, Union troops, deserters, refugees from Reconstruction, Mexican rebels and loyalists, French troops, Texas Rangers, the U.S. Army, and various other independent operators, used violence for survival, political power, and economic gain (often centering on land and/or cattle acquisition).

Collins approaches the border wars as a “another chapter in the ongoing racial and cultural conflict for supremacy over the Rio Grande Valley” (p. 6). Proclaiming to debunk some of the myths of Texas history, most notably the claim that all cattle rustlers on the border were Mexicans, he offers a fast paced and action-packed narrative history of military leaders, campaigns, and skirmishes. Collins dives straight into action from the prologue onward and the reader is taken on a whirlwind ride with James Duff’s Confederate partisans, the “Texas Devils,” John S. “Old Rip” Ford’s Texas cavalrymen, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie’s regulars, and Leander McNelly’s Texas Rangers, among other outfits of men steeped in violence. This amounts to an entertaining historical treatise of the borderlands turmoil from the Anglo perspective.

Some readers, however, may feel uncomfortable with how uncritically Collins at times writes about some of the men, most notably McNelly and Ford, who resorted to extreme violence. Ford gets depicted, for example, as “legendary” possessing “icy demeanor ... unflinching courage ... [and] steely determination” (p. 63). Some may also think that Collins misses the opportunity to write more intricate transnational histories of violence when, for instance, treating the French troops as little more than anecdotes or when failing to take seriously the Native American border peoples. The Lipan Apaches, as well as the Kickapoos, are now at best sidekicks, but mostly invisible, and sometimes cast simply as “marauding bands” (p. 54). In general, those opposing the Texas Rangers and U.S. troops are seldom fleshed out in equal detail, but often cast as simply “bandits” or “marauders,” bad guys and savages, whose motives and logic are largely left for the reader to guess.

Narrating a history of an intensely interesting region during a period of multidirectional and multilayered violence, this book seems to support a thesis of a racial divide between Anglos and Mexicans, instead of clearly moving beyond these kinds of dichotomies and exposing the fluid and positional identities at the border. In all, it will probably appeal more to those versed in traditional military histories rather than with those more in tune with the revisionist works.

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